

Editorial...

Town Needs to Help Make Skateboard Park Viable

Skateboarders face the possible August closing of a park that was supposed to provide a safe, fun place for local enthusiasts to enjoy their sport. Lack of funds to offset the cost of park operations has renewed debate about a long-standing town policy that favors user fees, and yet one cannot help but sympathize with people who frequent the skateboard facility.

If they knew how the budget process works or if town hall had been on top of the problem, the park's need for money would have been aired at one of this year's town meetings and voters could have decided whether to appropriate funds. The fact is that while the Recreation Department does not have enough to operate the park through Nov. 1, wage costs for park monitors were known ages ago. Better planning could have prevented a situation in which skateboarders and park advocates were expected to raise an entire season's worth of operating funds in a few short months.

Town officials are right when they cite the fees paid by families whose children play on youth or school athletic teams, participate in Recreation Department programs or use the Percy Walker Pool. Whether the Skate Park differs from a soccer team, its use structure is strikingly similar to the town pool. The pool is open to any resident for a fee. Households that use the pool frequently buy family passes, and they pay an additional charge for children to participate in swimming classes. Less frequent users have the option of paying on a per-visit basis. Swimmers can come and go as the posted schedule permits. The fees they pay help to cover the cost of pool maintenance and operations.

The pool was not always able to cover the full cost of annual operations. Town leaders worked for years to make the pool a break-even (or nearly break-even) facility. Once Proposition 2-1/2 took hold, everyone became more revenue conscious than ever and the trend toward user fees took hold. Recreation programs that were free once were forced to become self-supporting, and successively higher fees were tacked onto after-school activities, including competitive team sports.

Transfer station stickers that cost \$5 or \$10 not so long ago have skyrocketed to a whopping \$70 this year. To park at Duxbury Beach requires a \$35 per vehicle yearly permit. The services that carry a price tag on top of property taxes constitute a seemingly endless list. And it is in this context that most people at town hall view the Skate Park.

We think town officials are right to expect skateboard users to pay for their use of the facility, but like any other new endeavor, the Skate Park has to attract a high enough mass of visitors to make a membership fee affordable. As town department heads who juggle fee schedules know so well, a fee has to be high enough to produce revenue but not so high that it becomes a disincentive to the public.

A more appropriate policy for a new recreation area like this is to limit the barriers to participation so that

Parks
Duxbury Clipper, Wednesday, July 15, 1998

the number of users can grow. Something between free of charge and a hefty \$100-per-year membership fee means that taxpayers will subsidize some of the park's operating costs while allowing membership to build over time. In turn, the town's subsidy would gradually reduce. If it's too late to sponsor a special town meeting article to see if voters are willing to help keep the park open, the Selectmen should consider asking the Finance Committee for a reserve fund transfer. Apparently, the cost may qualify as an "unforeseen" expense under the reserve fund rules, for had they foreseen what is now unfolding, town officials would have done something more effective to prevent an interruption in service to users of the park.

Or would they?

Whether anyone wants to admit it openly, one of the Skate Park's problems is the stereotype ascribed to skateboarders. The prevailing notion—however unfair—is that kids with skateboards are rude punks or thugs who use drugs and get into a lot of trouble. In many cases, people who see teenagers on skateboards in supermarket parking lots at night automatically assume that something bad is about to happen. The general public is not alone in believing such things. Demeaning comments about skateboarders can be heard from the police, school officials, and other local authorities who take issue with the brazen, sometimes aggressive behavior of kids on skateboards.

We cannot help but wonder if the stereotype is getting in the way of town leaders who really could do something to save the park if they had the motivation and interest to do so. It may be true that the Recreation Department cannot absorb the park's operating deficit out of its existing budget, but we imagine that all of those bright minds at town hall can find a solution if they try a little harder.